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The Rancher Subsidy

*The West's fabled ranchers are in trouble.
The damage done to the land by cattle has
become a contentious environmental issue.
The ranchers' greatest enemy, though, is
the free market*

by Todd Oppenheimer

WHEN I first called to arrange a visit to his ranch, in the high desert country of central Oregon, Tom Campbell, a wiry man of sixty-eight, was hesitant. "I'm like a cigarette butt," he said. "Not a hell of a lot left." Campbell's remark was at least half in jest; several neighboring younger ranchers say they'd think twice about tangling with this man. But it's an apt description of the future of his territory. Once the symbol of America, the land of possibility, today's cowboy country is sorry stuff--fenced in, bereft of water, often grazed and trampled to dusty hardpan, challenged at almost every fence line by environmentalists grumbling about disappearing wildlife.



Such troubles provoke continual hand-wringing about the rancher's imminent demise. The truth is that ranchers won't be

disappearing anytime soon. Even in the post-industrial age the ranching community still possesses significant resources--vast quantities of land, and the leading role in America's self-image as tough and pioneering. When these assets are combined, they create tremendous political pull. As proof, look what happened to the Clinton Administration's efforts, two years in a row, to raise the fees the government charges for grazing on federal lands, virtually all of which lie in the eleven continental states west of Texas, making up a third of that territory. Ranchers who use federal land have long paid less than a third of the average private-land rate, and the increase proposed by the Administration was slight. Perhaps surprisingly, the group receiving this favor has always been a relatively small player in the nation's beef industry: the eleven western states produce less than a fifth of the nation's beef. Even so, western ranching interests beat the Clinton team handily. No one now wants to fight another losing battle with the rancher. Maybe he simply needs another set of survival methods--ones better for both the ranching community and the public at large.

Tom Campbell's ranch sits in the heart of the John Day River Basin, a 536-mile river network that constitutes one of the longest

undammed systems in the country. Fishery experts consider the John Day critical spawning grounds for the Pacific Coast's wild salmon, a fish that is central to the identity of this part of the country and whose decline throughout the Northwest has been making local headlines since the 1970s. Salmon pose a challenge that previous species in trouble never have--first because northwesterners care about them so passionately, and second because solving the salmon's problems requires the most drastic and complex changes that ranchers have faced in decades.

Dams are the biggest bullies in salmon streams. (Often when dams were created, builders included cement fish "ladders" to help salmon swim upstream from the ocean during spawning season; strangely, they rarely put screens on the other side, which would have kept young fish traveling back to the sea from being chewed up in the turbines like hamburger.) However, now that salmon are in peril, experts are scrutinizing every cause they can find. These include logging, overfishing, ravenous seals and sea lions, water pollution, and, finally, cattle tromping through upland spawning streams.



Campbell would be happy to help migrating salmon if he could find an economical way to do it. Unfortunately, being rough on rangeland streams is embedded in a rancher's standard routine. Consider the conditions on Campbell's ranch in an exceptionally wet year--1993, which saw the end of seven years of drought. One day that year in late summer, when the range has normally turned dry and yellow, many fields around the John Day were a thick green, and the John Day's North Fork, which borders Campbell's property, ran full and wide. On the far side of the river, where no cattle graze, the stream bed was in robust health--lined with overhanging banks where fish hide, and shaded by willows and other shrubbery, which keep the river cool and attract the insects fish eat. The near side, along Campbell's pastureland, provided a different picture. This shore had been grazed each year for decades, and the banks had long since been trampled and eroded into wide, stony shallows.

THE problem here, and on most western rangeland streams, is the beef cow's table manners. Cattle aren't native to this country--they come from Europe, where a wetter,

greener, and more resilient landscape than that prevailing in the West accustomed them to a sedentary grazing style, earning them the nickname "vacuum feeders." Their American descendants are especially rude. Heavily domesticated, safe from predators owing to the government's killing program, the American beef cow behaves like a spoiled houseguest, frequently hanging out along rangeland stream banks all day long. The West's native grazers--primarily elk, deer, antelope, and bighorn sheep--eat in a roving, less intensive manner. (Buffalo, which were quite rough on the land, ventured into only Montana and Wyoming of the eleven western states.)

By now the history and behavior of cattle have provoked an entire industry dedicated to kicking them off public lands in the West. "The livestock industry is the last wildlife-genocide program in the United States," says Bruce Apple, the director of an Oregon-based environmental organization appropriately called Rest the West. "All-out war is declared on a diversity of species every day to benefit a single industry."

To be fair, the crops ranchers raise for their cattle have actually been good for some wildlife species, particularly big game such as elk, deer, and antelope. It's some of the smaller inhabitants--birds, tortoises, and ferrets, to name a few--that cattle have decimated. Yet the acrimony in this war, and its costs and casualties to date, make one wonder whether the cowboy life has

simply become obsolete. On an ideal planet cattle would be restricted to our green eastern states or returned to the greener continent from which they came, leaving the arid West to the animals that are native to it. But the interlopers are here now-- about 45 million beef cattle roam some 870 million acres, more than two thirds of the land mass in our seventeen westernmost states. These animals live on roughly 200,000 cattle ranches. Many of the biggest are financially marginal sideline investments run by wealthy enterprises, including the Mormon Church, or by tycoons such as William Hewlett and David Packard, of the Hewlett-Packard Corporation. Most, however, are run by small ranching families whose primary asset is land the profitability of which is questionable--for running cattle or doing anything else.

One simple answer would be to fence cattle out of the streams--a step that Campbell has taken along the most vulnerable mile of his riverbank. But fencing every troubled stream won't work. The resulting labyrinth of barbed wire would be harmful to wildlife, troublesome to maintain, and costly. Good fencing can cost \$8,000 to \$12,000 a mile. And with every fence comes the cost of pumping and piping replacement water to thirsty cattle--and the bureaucratic trouble. Ironically, western-state water laws have traditionally encouraged ranchers to skip all this and walk their cattle directly into fragile

streams.

IN search of solutions, I paid a visit to Clint Gray, a ranch manager known around the valley for unusually ecological approaches to ranching. The operation that Gray was running at the time (recently another ranch manager, George Hixson, took it over) is unusual--there are no huge ranch headquarters, no shops full of tractors and machinery, no stacks of hay. There are just a few scattered buildings, including an old wooden house with a sagging front porch, which sit in a small green basin high above the main valley.

Gray first appeared on the doorstep of the ranch owner, Jim Bentley, one November day seventeen years ago, frozen out of a nearby gold-mining camp and looking for a home. Bentley let him stay in a broken-down cabin at the far corner of what was then a 50,000-acre ranch, and Gray lived there alone for the next few months, spending many hours studying the patterns of the animals and the grasses out of ecological curiosity. Soon he was recruited for work on the ranch, but the imprint remained of his months of watching the wild range. Now, at fifty-two, he calls himself a "recovering hippie." About a decade ago, after Bentley was forced to reduce his herd because of unrelated business losses, Gray, by then the ranch manager, made his priority not beef production but preserving the health of his boss's land--and gradually discovered a

highly effective method of running cattle. He was well suited to this role. His house feels like the backwoods cabins of his past; the walls, made of barn siding, are hung with spurs, branding irons, hay hooks, and a .30-30 rifle. Wood rasps sit next to the cereal bowls in the kitchen cabinet.

Bookshelves are filled with titles like *The Organic Way to Plant Protection*, *Holistic Resource Management*, and *The Knowledge Value Revolution*.

All that remains of Bentley's old spread is 8,200 acres (now under new ownership). Cattle graze every corner of this property, apparently without hurting it. This is a rare feat, which Gray accomplished by employing three surprisingly simple rules: Graze each field to its predetermined limit. Move the cattle before the grass is overgrazed. Don't bring them back until the plants are fully recovered. (Hixson now follows a similar routine.)

The first morning of my visit Gray took me out to show me the network of healthy wild grasses that can result from following his rules. Just beyond his driveway we stopped at a plot of giant wild rye that stood six to eight feet tall. In tales about the homesteading days in this basin cowboys ride through grass reaching higher than their horses' shoulders. Almost nowhere can cowboys do that today, but Gray believes that there were once many fields of giant rye just like his. "Look at the function of this country on a planetary scale," he told

me. "Everyone is familiar with the rain forests. If you said they were the lungs of the planet, people would relate to that. I look at the rangeland as the planet's skin. Its function is two things--water circulation and soil production." The water circulation occurs through the network of topsoil and range grasses, which store and filter rainwater, letting it gradually seep toward the rivers and oceans. Soil is produced by erosion--and by the action of plants and microorganisms, such as rangeland mosses. A rock at our feet provided an illustration: it cradled several lumps of moss, and when we pried one loose, we found a small, damp pocket of sod, which the moss's acids had created out of the rock itself. "The issue is how far does all this move? Does it end up in the John Day River--or right here? The major player in that role is the giant rye. It's the one plant that can flat-out stop soil movement."

I soon had a chance to verify Gray's claims firsthand. That afternoon we were hit with a typical high-desert summer storm, which pounded us with thick sheets of rain and hail for more than an hour. Such downpours are notorious in this country--they're nicknamed "gully washers," because of their tendency to carve deep ravines where only a ditch existed hours before. This storm was no exception: gravel roads were cut to pieces, some got washed out, and most stream banks were ripped clean of new grasses. Once the storm had passed, Gray and I ventured out to repeat the morning's

tour.

The air was spicy with the smell of sage, its leaf oils released by the beating of the hail. Just below the house a roadside gully full of soupy red-brown storm water had poured straight into Gray's stand of wild rye, carrying rocks the size of my fist. After a few gushy steps into the foliage we could see no further sign of rocks, or of mud. "Look at that," Gray said, smiling. "That soil didn't go ten feet!" (Later Wayne Elmore, a riparian specialist with the Bureau of Land Management, told me, "It's amazing how many people out here have never seen that. It never even dawns on them that that can happen.") Farther on we checked an old river gully. During our morning tour the gully had been dry but lined with rushes, because cattle hadn't grazed the area since early spring. When the storm brought its wash of mud, the rushes caught the whole load. Gray was thrilled. "This is going to give us several more inches of soil than was here a couple of hours ago," he said.

A hundred yards downhill, across a fence, the ravine continued onto a neighbor's property, where the soil was beaten into hardpan. The storm had shaved it cleaner still, leaving behind none of the water, topsoil, or promising seedlings that Gray had showed me. "It looks used, doesn't it?" the neighbor, Clyde Davidson, said to me later. "I have to use this grass. This is what I live on." Davidson's point was that Gray

could afford to go easy on the land, because he was drawing income from outside sources. Gray acknowledges this fact. Half his income came from a tiny cottage industry he has run for years: producing "twig beads" out of exotic woods. Only \$20,000 a year, he says, came from the ranch.

Still, Gray believes that the average rancher can duplicate his efforts, outside income or not. In fact, his seasonal routine soon built up so much vegetation that the cattle could graze straight through most winters with only a little supplementary hay, which he and Bentley bought. That meant they didn't have to harvest hay anymore. Bentley sold his expensive haying equipment, thereby cutting equipment and maintenance expenses dramatically. The ranch needed less income, so Bentley never brought his herd back to its previous size. As a result, the land continued to regain strength. Gray eventually was able to run 300 pairs of mothers and calves, a comparatively healthy herd for 8,200 acres. In contrast, Clyde Davidson once ran only 200 pairs on a ranch of about 13,000 acres. Much of the reason is that Davidson does not regularly move his cattle. In range-management circles his is disparagingly called the Columbus method of ranching: Turn your cattle out in the spring and discover them in the fall.

GRAY'S scheme sounded so easy that I couldn't wait to return to Tom Campbell's

ranch to see how much of it would work there. The next day Campbell and I drove across 45,000 acres, the swath of public and private land he ranches with four partners.

Like large parts of the West, this is rough terrain: rocky, deeply canyoned, chaotically spread out, much of it harsh and dry--not nearly as forgiving as the land that flourishes under Gray's rules. "That Cottonwood Ranch, it lays right," Campbell said, referring to the larger piece of Bentley's property as we jostled up the mountain in his four-wheel-drive truck. "There isn't a lot of north slopes frozen up. Even though some of it's steep, they have pretty good access to it. It's got county roads through it. If there's a problem, they can see it. They're not stuck off here five miles, where you'd have to ride your horses to get to it. You get some of these old cows out on the frozen hillsides in the winter, you can't hardly drive 'em off. They're scared to go downhill. I've fought whole bunches of cattle half a day to get 'em to go down a frozen-up trail. If you put the dogs to 'em, you'd kill half of 'em."

Campbell's point was that it's impossible for him and most western ranchers to graze cattle through the winter. So he must maintain haying equipment and grow hay--or buy it. The former owners of his land, he told me, once tried to "winter out" but failed. "The weather's so unpredictable. A cow that's gonna calve in the spring, she can go downhill to such a condition you can't

stuff enough hay in her to get her back where she'll produce a good calf."

Passing judgment on the Tom Campbells of the world is tricky, because their relationship with the range is so mixed. Campbell clearly loves the land: as we tromped across one dry plateau, he stopped frequently to pick wildflowers, and kept the tiny bouquet clutched in his thick hand for an hour. But he also manages this land on a brutally thin margin. To keep costs down, he and his partners employ only one cowboy to circulate 900 pairs of mothers and calves through 45,000 acres. The effects of such thriftiness are visible. We finally found the main herd near a water trough, where they'd been for days. Grasses in the area were long gone, and the ground was trampled into thick black mud. Similar scenes can be found on ranches throughout the West. According to federal studies, 60 percent of the Bureau of Land Management's rangelands are missing at least half their native plants and grasses, and could fare even worse in the future.

There is yet another approach to ranching, which aspires to combine Tom Campbell's average-rancher constraints with Clint Gray's idealism. The technique, which has a devoted following, is called holistic resource management; it correctly assumes that most ranchers run cattle somewhat haphazardly--overusing some spots, underusing others. The goal in HRM is to search out and destroy every inefficiency,

but with holistic ecological care. This goal might better define HRM as home-run management, because its practitioners can be seen constantly swinging for the fences. As one HRMer gave me a tour, proudly showing off his unusually ambitious routine, it became clear that so many tasks were falling through the cracks that the ranch was batting only about .250. One field contained a portable fence designed to move cattle frequently, but it was ineffective; after an hour or two the cows simply ambled back to overgraze their old ground. Over the hill a stream that has long been home to the salmon's cousin, the steelhead, was so beaten up that it looked like an erosion ditch. "There have been some tremendous failures using HRM," Wayne Elmore, the BLM's riparian specialist, told me. "People heard you can double your beef-production numbers. They didn't hear that you've got to watch your grass and be with your cows every day."

Even where federal land could easily be brought back to health by changes in method, the changes are discouraged by the inertia of federal policy. At last count the BLM, which oversees 163 million acres of rangeland, had never visited half of the most sensitive lands under its care. The record was even worse at the Forest Service. When federal auditors checked on a small sample of the 104 million acres of grazing lands under Forest Service control, they found that only 13 percent was being watched at all. As a result, most federal-

land ranchers operate in a way that is years, if not decades, out of date. "We're still managing cows with 1960s thinking," Bill Platts, a consultant and former Forest Service specialist in fishery-livestock interaction, told me. Even when a rancher decides to rest a parcel, Platts says, he has seen federal regulators pursuing their jobs by "beating the brush" to find someone else to run cattle on it.

A REAL solution should begin with rewards and penalties that apply to both public and private lands, since sensitive riverside lands and their wildlife run through both. On federal lands government range managers should more strictly control how many cattle graze each parcel, when and how long they're there, and how much herbage they consume. Private property can be subject to other pressures, such as the leverage that could be created through state or local tax incentives and the dispersal of water rights. One federal law, the Clean Water Act, already authorizes the government to penalize ranchers who foul streams on private lands--a provision of the law that has almost never been enforced.

To make comprehensive regulation work, hundreds more BLM and Forest Service regulators must get out and visit livestock ranches. This does not mean hiring a flock of new bureaucrats. Many of the needed regulators are already on staff--they're just bogged down in paperwork. Lyle Andrews, one of the BLM's three rangeland managers

in the John Day Basin, estimates that only 25 to 30 percent of their time is spent in the field. Last summer the Clinton Administration tried to free up Andrews. It adopted new rules for the BLM that should minimize paperwork, increase rangeland managers' powers, and let them cooperate with a rancher who wants to rest a parcel of land from grazing. Meanwhile, Republicans have countered with a plan of their own that would kill Clinton's changes--and expand ranchers' authority.

Perhaps it's a comment on human nature that the ranching community generally despises government interference, considering itself a paragon of American independence and self-sufficiency. As proof, some ranchers boast that theirs is the only major agricultural industry that survives without a government subsidy. "How can it be a subsidy when we're paying the government to use it?" Alisa Harrison, a National Cattlemen's Association spokesperson, asked me. True, they don't enjoy the explicit price supports to which dairy and wheat farmers have become addicted. Indirectly, however, almost every rancher is subsidized in some way, resulting in expenses to the public of at least \$100 million a year just in support of the eleven western states.

The bulk of this subsidy falls into three categories. First there's the discount ranchers get on leases of public lands--and the maintenance expenses federal agencies

must pick up as a result. These costs were conservatively estimated at \$52 million for 1990; more-aggressive tallies of the grazing programs' full administrative overhead have totaled up a price of \$200 million or more a year. The second big subsidy is what the government calls an "emergency feed program," supposedly reserved for times of drought, but now handed out habitually, even during wet years. This program has cost an average of \$26.5 million annually in these states for the past decade. Finally there's "animal damage control," the government's predator-killing program. In 1994 this program cost \$55.9 million nationwide, of which roughly \$22 million was spent on western livestock operations. The animals killed nationwide with this money included 163 black bears, 293 mountain lions, 1,928 bobcats, 8,973 foxes, and 85,571 coyotes. Presumably, such substantial government support of various kinds justifies holding ranchers accountable.

The government could use its subsidies to encourage other pursuits, such as rebuilding the wilderness. Jim Nelson, a Nevada Forest Service supervisor, has concluded that ranchers could raise as much beef as they do today on half as much land if they spent several decades managing it more carefully, giving some spots a complete rest. A forty-year time-out might strike some ranchers as unrealistic, but there are other ways to stay occupied. The marketing of outdoor recreation rights is one option. Throughout the West some ranchers already make as

much money on their private lands by selling high-priced rights to hunt revived herds of wild elk, deer, and antelope, or returning flocks of turkey and quail, as they do running cattle.

Some experts suggest that abolishing subsidies could actually help the range, as ranchers lose the extra feed and other supports that have encouraged them to overstock their pasturelands. Some combination of the free-market approach and a long rest may be ideal, but it's politically unrealistic right now.

Whatever step is taken next, it should begin with regulations that confront the work still to be done on the range--and that charge full market rates for public leases. At that point ranchers' adaptability could realistically be tested. Though it would help to know whether the rancher and the cowboy are really obsolete, the verdict is not yet in. The only way to arrive at one is to let ranchers face their true costs. Obviously, new expenses will force many out of business. When that time comes, the public can make its choice: increase the subsidy to preserve this rare but resonant icon of American identity, or decide that change is inevitable, and that ranchers like Tom Campbell must go the way of the horse and buggy. "If we really had a market environment, we'd lose people quicker, more efficiently," says Ed Chaney, an Idaho-based rangeland and watershed consultant. "But now, with our subsidy, we're just feeding the problem. The

system now is slow attrition, grinding them out of the industry. The dollar cost of keeping them out there is mind-boggling."

Illustration by Doug Martin

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